IMPERFECT CHARACTER OF THE PROPOSED BLOCK PLAN OF LONDON.

THE CROW'S NEST ON ST. PAUL'S.

HAVING recently paid a short visit to the cross of St. Paul's, on the top of which the surveyors' "crow's nest" has been for some time established, we fell into a train of thought rather of a mixed nature, arising partly from the inseparable association of ideas which occupy the mind when contemplating that noble edifice, and partly from considering the strange uses to which its topmost point has been applied.

We confess we feel a mixture of pride and shame in reference to our metropolitan cathedral—pride in possessing in the heart of our capital a building second only to one of the same class in Europe, or in the world, in point of magnitude and symmetrical proportions, and shame from the consciousness that, if it is a building worthy our nation, it is the only ecclesiastical edifice having the slightest pretensions to a European reputation that *Protestant* England, the wealthiest nation on earth, has ever produced. The humiliating truth must be confessed, that while our ancestors, in the ages of "darkness and superstition"—ages at which we are apt to sneer with an air of supercilious superiority — produced our fine old cathedral churches, which will bear comparison with any of their class in Europe, reformed and enlightened England has, in the three centuries which are distinguished by the most striking advances in national wealth, political liberty, social improvement, and scientific discovery, produced only one.

As, however, the object of our visit was not to fall into architectural speculations, we shall at once emerge at "the golden gallery," and thence mount by the slim but well-knit scaffold, on the summit of which the "crow's nest" observatory stands securely perched. And what a view bursts on the eye from this elevated spot! There are, it is true, none of the distinguishing and peculiar beauties which we have recently described as belonging to the "Modern Athens," of which our northern fellow subjects are so justly proud. We miss the terraced and unique features of "Auld Reekie;" the commanding prominences of Arthur's seat and Salisbury Craig; the old and venerable castle which has frowned proudly over the beautiful city for centuries; the fine pastoral range of the distant Pentlands; and the ever-heaving ocean which washes the bold and picturesque coasts of the noble estuary of the Forth: but in lieu thereof, we have a nation at our feet. "Londres," says M. Say, "n'est plus une ville: c'est une province couverte de maisons." And if without any very extraordinary degree of exaggeration it may be considered a province in point of magnitude, it may with equal or greater reason be considered a kingdom on account of its myriad population, its boundless wealth, and its vast influence in the commercial and political affairs of the world. While gazing from our elevated station, we confess we felt some degree of exultation when we beheld our noble river abounding with life and activity, and bearing on its majestic bosom and along its margins innumerable evidences of that spirit of enterprise which forms so essential an element in the Anglo-Saxon character, and which has so largely contributed in making us the precursors of civilization to the remotest regions of the habitable globe. And when we passed before our mind's eye the various great events that stand out prominently and form important *lime-marks* in the history of our capital and our country, which occurred almost beneath our feet, the thoughts involuntarily connected the scenes of them with the little temporary structure on which we stood. Within the range of our unaided vision, and within the area of the metropolitan survey, we have the theatre of many of the triumphs and defeats of the British nation. Here Roman discipline and valour exercised imperial, though not undisputed sway, from the time when Cæsar with his cohorts crossed the Thames at Coway Stakes, to the period when perhaps a greater than Cæsar, Constantine the Great, constructed the first walls round the city. The occupation of London by the Romans and its importance in their eyes are attested by the converging of several of their great military roads to its centre, where, not improbably, our "*London Stone*" formed the central miliary; and also from the numerous remains belonging to that people which have been discovered from time to time over almost every part of its area. Some of the vicissitudes which London underwent during the inroads and occupation of the country by the Saxons, and subsequently by the Danes, are recorded in the annals of the early chroniclers —and the repulses of the latter brave and sanguinary marauders, in its immediate neighbourhood, by Alfred and by Edmund Ironside, form interesting incidents in our mediæval history. Many of the most important events of the reign of the "great Norman robber," William the Conqueror, and his freebooting chieftains, who, with all his indifference to deluging the country with human blood, during an iron despotism never exceeded, laid the foundation, perhaps unconsciously, of much of our national liberty, occurred within the area under our observation. We cannot, within the limits of our sphere, notice, much less direct special attention to the historic events which occurred within our field of view during the ages of the stern and warlike Plantagenets and Tudors; the irresolute and vacillating Stewarts; our "immortal rebel;" and the *mediocre*—except where greatness or great events were thrust upon them—House of Hanover. Suffice it to say, that from no other point of view within the vast limits of the British empire can be contemplated the scenes of one hundredth part of the striking historical events, civil and ecclesiastical, and of the scenes, the names of which have been made almost as familiar as household words by the host of English writers, from old Geoffrey Chaucer to the present day, who have spread the glories of our land's language throughout the civilized world.

It may be asked by some of our readers why the matter-of-fact and unimaginative, because strictly professional pages of THE BUILDER, should be occupied by subjects like these. We shall come to this point presently. We have no desire to elevate the pursuits of the antiquary or the archæologist above their intrinsic merits and their legitimate claims to consideration. We have smiled at the peculiarities of some of the most learned and laborious among them, and have enjoyed the consternation of more than one worthy old Jonathan Oldbuck at the demolition of his favourite *Castellum* by the irreverent exclamation of an Edie Ochiltrie—"Pretorian here or Pretorian there, I mind the biggin o't." We cannot but know, however, that it is such men as the Camdens, the Lelands, the Stukeleys, and the Whittakers, that clear the way by their learned and laborious researches for the future historians. We would therefore willingly assist such disinterested labourers in what is considered by most men the least attractive, but assuredly not the least useful, field of historic investigation, by every means that can fairly be placed within their reach; and we would do so the more readily, as we would perpetuate the memory of great historic events, and give the scenes of their enactment a local habitation as well as a name, with the same degree of interest as we would preserve our national records and monuments of antiquity from desecration.

We were, therefore, seriously considering the great facilities which the general metropolitan survey would afford for the furtherance of the object here indicated, if competent parties were engaged to represent upon the map, *the correct position of every object or locality of antiquarian, historical, or even literary interest* within the extent of the district to be surveyed; and by means of a copious index make every such locality an object discoverable in a moment by those interested in the pursuit of such investigations. We had, however, some misgivings as to the entire practicability of carrying out these views to their full extent, when we recollected the materials of which the "*active members*" of the Metropolitan Commission of Sewers are composed. We, therefore, made it our business to ascertain what was in reality to constitute their "*block plan*," which has been so often brought before public attention during the last six months, and we give the result of our inquiries the benefit of our circulation.

We would not willingly do injustice to this commission; we are not ignorant of the great ability of one of them for collecting evidence and drawing up reports in reference to economical and sanitary subjects; while another of them is known to possess the faculty of talking volubly and speciously upon geological, sanitary, or any other subjects, and has the tact, by the exercise of consummate self-possession and a jovial laugh for everybody, of convincing many that what he can talk so confidently about he must be perfect master of. Some know very little of the matter, others seldom attend, and, moreover, they have to fight against difficulties. We confess, however, that we were quite unprepared for such an inefficiency as this "*block plan*" will be, unless the arrangement be altered. We scarcely expect our readers to credit us when we inform them that, in addition to the omission of the divisions and numbers of the houses from this map, the scale of which is sufficiently large to distinguish the minutest property, it is positively not intended to insert upon it the public buildings, the territorial, ecclesiastical, and electoral boundaries of the metropolis, and that even the river Thames itself may, and possibly will, be excluded, without the slightest violation of the "instructions" for the execution of the survey. A map of London and its environs, of the capacious dimensions of four or five thousand square feet, and all water-courses, woods, trees, gardens, pleasure-grounds carefully excluded from it, will have the merit of being at least a curiosity of its kind.

We have observed that since the publication of the article in THE BUILDER of the 1st inst., on the subject of the exclusion of the "City" from the general survey, negotiations have been going on between the Metropolitan and the City Commissioners of Sewers.* We care not which has taken the initiative in this matter. We are perfectly willing to give both parties credit for shewing a laudable anxiety to get out of a very absurd position. Our only motive for interference is a desire to obtain a perfect result for the public: we care no less for the City authorities than we do for the Commission; we care no more; and will as resolutely condemn what we think wrong in one as in the other. If it is necessary to make a new and expensive map on account of the defects of those already in existence, and we know that it is, it is equally necessary that the new one shall not only be free from the errors of its predecessors, but that it shall be as perfect a thing of the kind as can be made.

We would also direct the attention of the antiquarian and archæological societies to the necessity of their taking steps to see that the important information in which they are more immediately interested is not entirely disregarded. There will probably never again occur so favourable an opportunity of ascertaining and fixing the localities and objects, respecting which so much has been said and written, but the memory of which, if this opportunity be neglected, will inevitably, year by year, pass away.

For ourselves, so far from having offered opposition to the execution of the general survey, we have advocated it, understanding that it was to be at the same time a perfect survey; but we have the most insuperable objection to the cheese-paring economy of making a preposterously imperfect work. We repeat, if the thing is to be done, let it be well done, and then we may hope that it is done once for all.

LETTERS PATENT.—A Parliamentary paper shews that the total number of letters patent for inventions granted in the United Kingdom in 1847 amounted to 740, against 761 in 1846, and the total fees received thereon to 32,077*l.*, against 34,103*l.* in the preceding year. Of this sum, 20,515*l.* were paid over to the Consolidated Fund, and 9,830*l.* to the several offices entitled to receive the same.

* Since the above was in type, the special committee of the City Commission, on the Ordnance Survey, have reported to their constituents, that as they had 'gathered,' at an interview with the new Metropolitan Commission, that the survey of the City 'would not be done' unless the City Commission consented to pay for the outline of the block plan, which, with the levels, would cost 450*l.*, they thought it desirable that the court should incur that expence, in order that the survey 'should be rendered perfect by including that of the City,' although, for all the purposes of sewerage, they deemed their own plans and levels quite sufficient. It has accordingly been agreed to apply for the cash to the Common Council, on the ground that it is 'desirable to have a perfect plan of the metropolis.'

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